

**STATEMENT OF NINA SHEA, DIRECTOR  
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**Before the**

**COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS, AND  
INTERNATIONAL OPERATIONS**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, for allowing me to testify today on behalf of the Center for Religious Freedom.

Chairman Chris Smith has been a dedicated and passionate leader on human rights for many years, and I wish to commend him for all the important hearings held under his chairmanship in this subcommittee. They have held governments around the world accountable, including our own, and given hope and relief to millions of the world's oppressed. This hearing today is no exception.

Egregious religious persecution occurs in North Korea, Saudi Arabia, China, Vietnam, Eritrea, Iran, Sudan and several other countries officially designated by the State Department as "Countries of Particular Concern," and is being addressed by the other witnesses today. There is an additional country where religious groups of various faiths face some of the bloodiest persecution in the world today, a country that is not listed among the CPC's. It is Iraq, and it is on this country, and particularly on the persecution faced by Iraq's smallest, most vulnerable minorities, that I will direct my testimony.

We should view Iraq's smallest religious minorities – the Christians, Yizidis, Mandeans, Baha'is, Kaka'i and Jews – as we once did Soviet Jews. The persecution these small minorities face stands out against even the horrific violence now wracking the rest of the population. This is demonstrated by the stark statistic that an estimated half of the members of the small minorities have been driven from their homes in the past two or three years, either to other parts of the country or abroad. Their very survival as communities within Iraq is now threatened by what amounts to ethnic, or rather cultural, cleansing. The State Department's Religious Freedom Reports accurately depicts a defenseless non-Muslim population that is being pounded by all other factions. Al Qaeda terrorists, Sunni insurgents, Shiite militias, Kurdish militants, and criminal gangs all persecute and prey on these small religious minorities.

Their situation is unique: Their religion and culture identifies them with the "infidel occupiers" in the minds of the extremists, and lacking the militias, tribal structures and foreign champions of Iraq's other groups, they are singularly defenseless against the mayhem that has followed the occupation. Because they do not govern any department, they are at the tender mercies of those dominant groups who aim to take their property, businesses and villages. The United States has a great moral responsibility to address

their plight, and specific policy actions are required to help them. These policies will differ from the efforts we once took on behalf of Soviet Jews. Most of these small minority people do not wish to leave Iraq. We must expeditiously take actions that will maximize their security within Iraq, and will draw back some of those who have taken temporary shelter in other surrounding countries. For the most desperate among them, we must begin to resettle them here, where many, if not most, already have relatives who are well established.

While Shiites and Sunnis, who comprise Iraq's religious majority, also face appalling levels of extremist violence, sectarian strife, and official discrimination on account of their religions, it is the plight of Iraq's small religious minorities on which I will focus today both because the situation confronting these peoples threatens their very survival, and because their situation is not being sufficiently addressed by U.S. policy and was all but ignored in the recent Iraq Study Group Report. The very fact of their defenselessness -- they are persecuted and killed, but do not themselves persecute and kill -- contributes to the inverse relationship between their suffering and the world apathy at their situation.

Iraq's small religious groups -- Christians (Chaldean, who are Eastern rite Catholics Assyrian, including the Church of the East, Syriac, who are Eastern Orthodox, Armenians, both Roman Catholic and Orthodox, and Protestants, who are Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist, evangelical and others), Mandeans (followers of John the Baptist), Yizidis (an ancient angel religion), Bahais, Kaka'i (a syncretic group around Kirkuk) and Jews, together number an estimated one million of Iraq's population of 26 million at the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. The largest group of these is Christian, the next largest is the Yizidis with about 70,000-500,000 and the Mandeans with about 6,000-10,000, and the smallest, the Jewish community, whose numbers had dwindled to the double-digits by 2003. Under escalating persecution and violence, these groups are fleeing their homeland *en masse*. Though they constitute some 3 or 4 per cent of Iraq's population, according to the UNHCR, they represent about 40 per cent of the refugee population. This disproportionate exodus attests to the intolerable treatment and conditions they face inside Iraq. We have also received reports that an estimated half of the Christians who remain in Iraq are internally displaced, with those from the south moving to the north of the country for relative security.

The UNHCR has determined that they are being targeted for their religion by militants determined to establish an extreme sharia ruled state. Because they speak Western languages and have cultural ties to the West, they have also been targeted for perceived or real cooperation with the US embassy and the Coalition.

In 2004 a dozen churches were attacked in coordinated bombings and other similar incidents have followed. Since July 2006 alone, seven clergymen have been kidnapped and two of them, both from Mosul, murdered. As the State Department notes, these religious groups can no longer gather in safety and many have stopped holding worship services altogether. My friend, the Chaldean Archbishop of Basra, who says his prayers in the language of Jesus, Aramaic, as is the Chaldean tradition, has been transferred apparently for security reasons to the diocese of Australia and New Zealand, and his

Basra diocese now has only a couple of hundred families remaining. These churches are not just lying low, they are being eradicated.

Christian, Mandaean and other women in some areas are being violently pressured to conform to supposed Islamic conduct and dress, with some killed or maimed, while men who operate liquor stores and cinemas have also been violently attacked by extremists. Flyers were posted at Mosul University this month declaring: *“in cases where non-Muslims do not conform to wearing the Hijab (woman’s head cover) and are not conservative with their attire in accordance with the Islamic way, the violators will have the Sharia and the Islamic law applied to them.”* It was in Mosul that some female students were murdered for wearing Western clothes and having a picnic with men in 2005 and where Orthodox priest Fr. Paulis Iskander was beheaded and dismembered on October 11.

Some of the death threats against non-Muslim minorities have been personal and some of these have been collected and translated, such as the samples that follow that were provided to the Center for Religious Freedom by the Chaldean Federation of America.:

*“To the traitor, apostate Amir XX, after we warned you more than once to quit working with the American occupiers, but you did not learn from what happened to others, and you continued, you and your infidel wife XXX by opening a women hair cutting place and this is among the forbidden things for us, and therefore we are telling you and your wife to quit these deeds and to pay the amount of (20,000) thousand dollars in protective tax for your violation and within only one week or we will kill you and your family, member by member, and those who have warned are excused.  
Al-Mujahideen Battalions.”*

*“You traitor, Amjad,  
We can behead the traitor and we are ready for that.  
We can chase the infidels and renegades and everybody who deals with them and with the occupiers and punish them according to Islam law, ‘The unjust have no supporters’  
Allah is the most honest,  
The Islamic Army in Iraq.”*

*“This is the last warning... to the American nasty crusader agent (James). Our battalion will execute you by cutting your head and blowing up your house. Allah willing. Our battalions will pursue the snakehead your brother (Talia). We will arrest him wherever he is – God willing.  
Copy to the battalion Commander the Mudjahed  
Abu Sayyaf and the Commander Abu Therr”*

There are many other such examples -- and many cases of targeted killings backing them up. Grisly reports of kidnapped Christian children being crucified and mutilated after ransoms were not paid have emerged this fall from the ChaldoAssyrian community. Numerous cases are also reported by the Assyrian International News Agency on its website, [www.aina.org](http://www.aina.org).

This week, I received a letter from the Sabeen Mandaean Association in Australia that detailed the cases of Mandeans kidnapped and assassinated for their religion this past year. Some of the kidnap-for-ransom victims were reportedly circumcised before being released, a detail that indicates religion played a role in the crime.

Listed among the cases was the murder on December 2 of the Rev. Taleb Salman Araby, the deacon who assisted His Holiness Ganzevra Sattar Jabbar Hilo al-Zahrany, the worldwide head of the Mandaean Community. He was easily recognizable because he wore the white *rasta* robes of the Mandaean clergy. His family was prevented from holding a funeral service for him by extremists who threatened to blow up their house and the bereaved family was forced to bury him without any religious ceremony.

Furthermore, such violence against Christians and members of the smallest minorities is conducted with impunity. In northern Iraq and in the Nineveh Plains region where up to a third of the small minorities live, there have been no local police forces established unlike other areas in Iraq, and the few forces that are provided to Christian and minority areas from elsewhere have been known to harass and prey on these small minorities. There are reports that the judiciary discriminates against Christians and other small minorities. The Washington-based Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project, for example, reports that courts in the Kurdish area discriminate against Assyrians who contest land and property confiscated by Kurdish militants.

The Project also reports that in the Kurdish areas, Christian and other small minority towns have not benefited equally from U.S. reconstruction and development aid; their villages have been excluded by provincial-level officials from benefiting from water and electrical systems and denied their fair share of other utilities and services, such as schools and medical facilities, provided by U.S. aid. Apparently the US has no safeguards or checks in place to prevent this. As an Assyrian mayor of one of these towns, Telhaif, told me in November, such discrimination and marginalization is making minority towns and neighborhoods uninhabitable and forcing their residents out. According to detailed reports, once abandoned, Christian, Yizidi and Mandaean properties have been seized by Kurdish authorities. Such treatment has given rise to charges that Kurdish authorities are carrying out ethnic cleansing against Christians and smaller minorities, including other ethnic minorities, such as the Shabaks and Turkomen.

Government leaders in Iraq have been largely indifferent to the victimization of the small minorities. The Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, Mahmoud al-Mashhadani, was quoted earlier this year urging kidnappers to target Christian women instead of Muslims. After addressing the kidnapping of his own sister, Thayseer, the Speaker of the Iraqi National Assembly was broadcast by al-Iraqiya Satellite Television as stating: "Why kidnap this Muslim woman; instead of Thayseer, why not kidnap Margaret or Jean?" The latter are Christian names, thus implying that it would have been better for a Christian woman to have been kidnapped, raped and killed.

The United States Government urgently needs to take effective measures to help the most vulnerable of Iraq's religious groups. The US owes a special obligation to these peoples because their non-Muslim status associates them with the American occupation in the minds of Islamist extremists. Furthermore, they alone are defenseless, lacking militias, social structures and governing authority. Such measures should include actions that would help these peoples, who have maintained a presence in Iraq for thousands of years, to survive inside Iraq, as well as actions that would help the most desperate among them find sanctuary abroad. All such measures should be expeditiously implemented. They are:

- Appoint a Special Aid Coordinator for Iraq as recommended by the Iraq Study Group. This post could prove to be very helpful in sustaining Christian and small minority communities, particularly those in northern Iraq that are being now marginalized.
- Provide emergency relief for Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq. Ensure that this aid reaches the needy Christians, and other small minorities now amassing in northern areas of Iraq.
- Ensure that US reconstruction aid and development assistance is equitably distributed to Christian, Yizidi, Mandeian and other small minority communities, including the ethnic minorities, the Shabaks and Turkomen, particularly in northern Kurdish areas where many are now fleeing from other parts of Iraq and where the US carries much influence. Legitimate, independent, local leadership of these minority communities should be consulted about the reconstruction priorities of their communities. Kurdish authorities must not be allowed to use US aid to ethnically cleanse northern Iraq.
- Support the establishment of a new autonomous district that would be jointly governed by ChaldoAssyrian Christians, Shabaks (an ethnic minority with Shiite roots), Yizidis and other small minorities in the Nineveh Plains, an initiative provided for under article 125 of Iraq's Constitution.
- Support the formation of police forces drawn from the local minority populations for Christian and small minority areas in the Nineveh Plains, as consistent with a decision of the Iraqi National Assembly and implemented elsewhere in Iraq.
- Use more effective diplomacy with Iraqi leaders, particularly Kurdish leaders, to insist on the protection and equitable treatment of small religious minorities.
- Resettle in the United States the most vulnerable members of the Christian and other smallest minorities. This group includes those orphaned, widowed, and maimed by targeted violence. There are over thousands of such refugees who seek to join relatives already in the US. Last year the US admitted a mere 198 refugees from Iraq, and is already authorized to admit up to 20,000. The US must

provide funding to the UNHCR for the processing of such people and admit greater numbers.

Many other steps could be taken as well. While no group is spared suffering in Iraq, the smallest minorities are defenseless and the most vulnerable. In addition, they are viewed as collaborators of American occupiers by extremists. Today these Iraqi Christian ChaldoAssyrians, Yizidis, Mandeans, and others are comparable to yesteryear's Soviet Jews. They need our help to survive egregious and pervasive religious persecution and discrimination. The State Department's Religious Freedom Reports describes much of their suffering, but U.S. policy in their regard has been lacking.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This concludes my testimony.